

Red Blood Cells

Red blood cells carry oxygen (O_2) to all cells in the body. They also return carbon dioxide (CO_2) from the body to the lungs, where we breathe it out. Red blood cells are made inside of our bones, and only last about 120 days.

Red blood cells can carry oxygen thanks to something inside them called hemoglobin. As the blood flows through the lungs, hemoglobin soaks up the oxygen we breathe in, making the blood bright red. The red blood cells then move around the body in our blood vessels and release oxygen for our cells to use. As they release oxygen they become dark red instead of bright red. However, our blood never turns blue like some people think – it just looks blue when we see it through our skin!

Almost everything our body has to do depends on every cell getting the oxygen it needs. This means that red blood cells are very important for our health. If there aren't enough red blood cells, wounds or cuts might heal slowly and the heart may have to work too hard.

Red blood cells are flexible disks with a dent in the center – they look kind of like a snow-tube or a cough drop. This shape gives the red cell a large surface area so that it can soak up lots of oxygen. The flexibility of red blood cells lets them squeeze through tiny vessels, which are sometimes only a little bit bigger than one red blood cell.

